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SUBJECT: FIFTEEN MALIAN SOLDIERS KIDNAPPED EAST OF KIDAL

REF: BAMAKO 0554

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Fifteen Malian soldiers were reportedly kidnapped by armed men in northern Mali on August 26, while escorting a team of Agriculture Ministry officials in the Tamensa region, between Tin-essako and the Malian border with Niger, to assess the prevalence of locusts. Preliminary reports indicate that one individual may have been wounded and that the attackers commandeered 3 vehicles. Postings on a Kidal Tuareg website reports that the Agriculture team's security escort, which consisted of 23 Malian soldiers, was overpowered in Tegarete, about 120 KM east of Kidal near Tin-essako. Eight of the Malian soldiers were freed shortly after the incident. Other reports suggest that at least some of the released soldiers were ethnic Tuaregs. The Malian government has reportedly dispatched reinforcements by air to Kidal.

2.(C) The assailants are presumably members of the newly-formed Niger-Mali Tuareg Alliance (ATNM) led by Ibrahim Bahanga and his father-in-law Hama ag Sid'ahmed. The hostages and their kidnappers were last seen heading toward Niger.

3.(C) Two events last week suggested that Malian officials were growing increasingly concerned by rumors of an overt link between Bahanga and Niger's Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ). On August 21 in the northern Malian city of Gao, Mali and Niger held bi-lateral talks on cross-border security during which the two nations agreed to increase surveillance and cooperation along their common border and consider implementing joint security patrols. For its part, press reports indicate the MNJ has denied involvement.

4.(C) Other reports indicate Qadhafi may be trying to insert himself in negotiations between the MNJ, Niger, Mali, and Malian Tuaregs. Qadhafi invited three Tuareg leaders to Tripoli the week of 13 August, including ADC leader Iyad ag Ghali, as well as National Assembly deputies Mohamed Intallah and Hamato Bajan; although the exact nature of the talks were unclear. All three hold Malian elective offices, but were supposedly invited to Libya as representatives of the Malian Tuareg Community.

5.(U) On August 23, Mali's national television station broadcast a statement from Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) spokesperson and National Assembly Deputy-elect Ahmada ag Bibi denying rumors of a link between the ADC and Tuareg rebels in Niger. Ag Bibi's television appearance followed a brief trip to Algiers with Minister of Territorial Administration Kafougouna Kone to discuss the pace of the Algiers accords implementation. Ag Bibi subsequently told Radio France that while key aspects of the accords - such as

socio-economic "reinsertion" of former rebel combatants, a paved road to Kidal and other infrastructure projects - had not yet been realized, his confidence in the Malian government's willingness to implement the accords remained intact. ATNM "vice-president" Hama ag Sid'ahmed has listed the renegotiation of the Algiers accords, signed by Mali and the ADC in July 2006, as one of the ATNM's main objectives.

Comment: An Escalation of Tactics

6.(C) Although information on the kidnapping of 15 Malian soldiers remains sparse, yesterday's events indicate that Bahanga and his handful of followers are the likely culprits and continue to operate without impediment along the Mali-Niger border east of Kidal. If these reports are true, the similarities between this kidnapping and recent ones in Niger suggest that Bahanga, if not overtly aligned with at least some members of the MNJ, at least adopted the MNJ's strategy of hostage taking. Prior to this event, some Malians were concerned that the Tuaregs who had split from the ADC would seize a remote military base as leverage in future negotiations; these kidnappings may then be Bahanga's alternative avenue for negotiating himself out of hot water for the attack he led in May of this year that killed at least four Malian soldiers (reftel). The kidnapping reinforced concerns among some in Bamako that Bahanga may consider employing land mines, another weapon in the MNJ's arsenal.

McCulley